

An Anarchist Review of Change the World without Taking Power by John Holloway

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Change the World Thru Stateless Empowerment

Holloway is right in saying that the oppressed should not build a new state, but wrong in denying that the workers should use revolutionary power to get rid of the old state and the capitalist system. We need a stateless federation of communes and councils.

An Anarchist Review of Change the World without Taking Power; The Meaning of Revolution for Today (New Ed.), by John Holloway. 2005. London/Ann Arbor MI: Pluto Press.

Early in this book, the author asks, "How can the world be changed without taking power? The answer is obvious: we do not know." (p. 22) On the last page of the original edition, he writes, "How then do we change the world without taking power? At the end of the book, as at the beginning, we do not know...This is a book that does not have a happy ending." (p. 215) Two years after publishing the original book, Holloway wrote an Epilogue. He begins by citing the frequent response to the book, "Fine, but what on earth do we do?" (p. 216) His response is, "Some readers have wanted to find an answer in this book and have felt frustrated. But there is no answer, there can be no answer." (p. 217) His last paragraph says, "Perhaps, after all, communism is wave after wave of unanswered questions..." (p. 245)

For me, this raises unanswered questions all right: Why did he write this book? And why should anyone read it (except to review it)? Inbetween his assertions of not-knowing, Holloway discusses the state, the negative dialectic, the economic law of value, the fallacies of Hardt and Negri's Empire, alienation and fetishism in capitalist society, the weaknesses of traditional Marxism and the virtues of a more flexible,"open," Marxism, and other topics. To me some of these topics are interesting but I found most to be boring and poorly written. As he admits, they do not help in answering the question, How do we change the world? He might as well have discussed existentialism, classical Greek comedy, and interpersonal psychoanalysis for all their help.

There is a basic fallacy in this book, which makes it difficult for Holloway to answer his question. He sees only two alternatives for trying to change the world: (1) the oppressed might take state power, either taking over the existing state through peaceful electoral means (reformism) or through overturning the existing state and creating a new state (Leninism). As he says, these methods have not worked very well in creating a self-managing society. Or (2) not taking power at all, seeking to replace the state by gradually building up new relationships and alternate institutions. He admits that he does not know how this could be done.

It does not occur to him that there is another possibility: (3) the workers and oppressed should eventually overturn the existing state and take power, but not take state power, that is, not create a new state. Instead they should create new, nonstate, institutions of self-management. We would be taking power in the sense that we would get rid of the state and all capitalist institutions, over the violent objections of the capitalists and their hangers-on, and we would be organizing a new society. This requires power. But we would not create a new state, that is, a socially-alienated institution, with specialized bodies of police and military, prison guards, bureaucrats, and professional politicians, standing over the rest of society. Instead, the tasks of social coordination and military defense would be carried out by the working people themselves through their own organizations.

In the original text, Holloway occasionally writes of councils and popular assemblies which arise in revolutions, but he does not consider them as alternate institutions of power. In the Epilogue he comes closer. "The organizational form which I take as the most important point of reference is the council or assembly or commune, a feature of rebellions from the Paris Commune

to the Soviets of Russia to the village councils of the Zapatistas or the neighborhood councils of Argentina.” (p. 223) He also endorses factory councils as advocated by the Council Communist Pannekoek. He writes that the state and capitalist economy should be replaced by a federated “commune of communes or council of councils”. (p. 241)

Holloway makes clear that his concept is of nonstate institutions. In the Russian revolution, “the seizure of state power was the defeat of the Soviets...The notion of a soviet state or a ‘state of the Commune-type’ is an abomination, an absurdity.” (p. 232) This is because “...the state is a specifically capitalist form of social relations.” (p. 262) I agree. The commune of communes must not be a new state. It is nothing else than the self-organized working class and oppressed.

To establish and maintain a council system, a commune of communes, would require an exercise of power. It would have to clear away the capitalist state and capitalist institutions. It would have to defend itself against counterrevolutionary attacks. It would have to reorganize society and create new institutions, working to create a cooperative, radically democratic, classless society. This is the empowerment of the oppressed.

“The Meaning of Revolution Today”

The above subtitle of the book implies that Holloway advocates social revolution. He does not. He regards what he is advocating as a “revolution,” because he wants a total change in the social system, from capitalism to stateless communism. But he proposes to get there — if it is possible to get there, something he is not certain about — through a series of small, peaceful, and gradual changes, that is, reforms. This is reformism. He specifically rejects the notion of overthrowing the capitalist class and smashing its state. He rejects the idea of change turning on the “pivot” of a popular seizure of power.

He claims, “Revolution can never be a single event or a state of being, but an unending process, or an event which must be constantly renewed. The orthodox tradition (...) sees revolution as an event that gives rise to an identified post-revolution, with disastrous consequences.” (p. 258) Why this must be so, is not explained (like so much else in this book). It is true that a revolution is a drawn-out process. Past revolutions have typically included decades of tensions leading up to them, a period of mass struggles, a number of stages, a seizure of power, civil and international wars, followed by a period of consolidation. In the U.S. revolution, for example, the time from, say, the Boston Tea Party to the signing of the new Constitution, including seven years of war with the British, was quite lengthy.

But that is not what Holloway is talking about. He is denying any brief period in which society rapidly turns from one social system into another. Instead he sees on-going changes with no distinct beginning and no end in sight. There is no time when people can say, This was capitalism, and this, now, is libertarian socialism. “ After all, communism is wave after wave of unanswered questions...” If this is so, then there is no time when the two sides (if we can speak of sides) are drawn up in conflict with each other and have to fight it out. There is no revolution.

This brings the obvious criticism, as we build up these alternate institutions, will not the capitalists use their state power to crush them? The history of fascism tells us that the ruling class will not let itself be peacefully shuffled off the stage. Holloway notes that critics have challenged him, “ ‘Haven’t you forgotten that when it comes to the crunch, it’s a question of violence, of physical force? We can develop all the self-determining projects or revolts we like, but once they

become annoying (not even threatening) for the ruling class, they send in the police and the army and that's the end...So what's your answer to that, Professor?" I hum and I haw and I have no answer..." (p. 237) Again, he does not know! Instead he "suggests" some comments which relate to the evils of establishing a new state, not to a power struggle between the capitalist state and a commune of communes.

Part of his reformism depends on his attitude toward violence. In the original text, he sounds like a pacifist. He asserts that mass violence would not work against the superior power of the state (although all successful revolutions began with the state having superior power). Even a revolutionary army, he adds (correctly), is an authoritarian institution. However, in the Epilogue he remembers that the Zapatistas, his model, did use violence as part of their strategy. It was not their sole technique, but was embedded in their social mobilization. (Similarly, an urban workers uprising would include strikes and factory seizures, and political appeals to the ranks of the government's army.) He points out "...the importance of seeing the Zapatistas as an armed community rather than as an army." (p. 263) (Similarly, anarchists have advocated a popular militia rather than a regular army.) This is part of creating a commune of communes, rather than a state.

The problem remains. It is necessary to WARN the workers and oppressed: if we threaten the establishment by building popular institutions of struggle, such as militant unions, cooperatives, self-managing communities, and so on, then the ruling class will use the state (and extra-state forces, such as fascist bands) to attack us, to smash our organizations, to arrest and kill prominent militants, and to kill large numbers of ordinary people. Therefore we must prepare for such an attack by building up organs of social defense, including democratic armed forces, and by winning over the ranks of the military. Holloway does not make this warning; this is the great failure of all reformists.

Anarchism and Marxism

People who know this book only by reputation or by its title, often assume that it is about anarchism. Misleadingly, the book cover has a circle around the A in the word Change, suggesting the anarchist symbol. Actually Holloway is ignorant of anarchism. Early on, he notes that for Marxists, "Approaches that fall outside this dicotomy between reform and revolution were stigmatised as being anarchist." (p. 12) That is, "anarchist" was a term of insult. He refers to a 1905 pamphlet on anarchism written by...Stalin. Holloway's only other reference to anarchism is, "...the old distinctions between reform, revolution, and anarchism no longer seem relevant, simply because the question of who controls the state is not the focus of attention." (p. 21) He is unaware that anarchism is not only against the state but is against all forms of domination and authoritarianism.

His concept of gradual change without confronting the state — which Holloway treats as a brand new insight — was advocated generations ago by certain anarchists. It was the program of Proudhon, the person who first called himself an "anarchist." It was advocated by Gustav Landauer. The history of this idea can be found in Martin Buber's Paths in Utopia. In the 60s this was raised by Paul Goodman. This was part of the program of Murray Bookchin's libertarian municipalism. It is astonishing that Holloway knows nothing of this theoretical history.

However, this gradualist anarchism has traditionally been challenged by the trend of revolutionary, working class, anarchism. From this view, contrary to Holloway, “the question of...the state” (if not “who controls the state”) is still a “focus of attention.” This is because the state remains the center of the ruling class’ power over the workers and all oppressed. The state cannot be worked around. We may try to ignore it but it will not ignore us! It must be actively dismantled. From the time of Bakunin, anarchists have advocated the overthrow of the state in a revolution and its replacement by a commune of communes.

Instead, Holloway locates himself in the Marxist tradition, if not as a traditional Marxist. “The most powerful current of negative thought is undoubtedly the Marxist tradition.” (p. 8) (By “negative thought” he means attacking the evils of capitalism without proposing a new vision. This is supposed to be good.) He declares, “The aim is...sharpening the Marxist critique of capitalism.” (p. 9) I have some sympathy for his views, which include rejecting the mechanical-scientistic aspects of Marxism while looking toward the critical-subjective and libertarian side of Marxism.

However, Holloway is an example of the further decay of Marxism. The antistatist current he represents, libertarian or autonomist Marxism, began as a revolutionary working class theory. This includes the Council Communists (such as Pannekoek and Paul Mattick), the Johnson-Forest Tendency (C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya), the British Marxist Historians (such as E.P. Thompson), the early Socialisme ou Barbarie (Cornelius Castoriadis) and its co-thinkers in the original British Solidarity (Maurice Brinton), and the original Italian autonomists and workerists (such as Negri or Tronti). These all advocated that the working class make a revolution and smash the state, replacing it with an association of councils. Recognizing the centrality of the working class did not necessarily prevent them from accepting the importance of other social forces. For example, in the thirties C.L.R. James developed a brilliant analysis of the autonomous struggle of African-Americans.

But over the last decades, many autonomous Marxists have abandoned its revolutionary aspects. They have dropped the emphasis on the working class, either by expanding the term to include almost everyone besides capitalists, making the concept meaningless, or by dissolving the workers into a pluralistic “multitude.” In any case they no longer see a need for a revolution. They advocate gradual, piecemeal, and peaceful change through dropping out, ceasing to work, and joining in an “exodus” from capitalist society. Negri and Hardt have written influential books denying that capitalism is still imperialist and needing to be overthrown. Holloway’s theses have been discussed. Just as “orthodox” traditional Marxism has ended in social democracy and Stalinism (or Trotskyism), so autonomous Marxism has ended all too often in its own form of reformism.

I reject Holloway’s insistence that we do not know, and cannot know, how to change the world. This does not mean going to the other extreme and claiming to have all the answers. One question we cannot answer is whether we will be successful. Unlike a common interpretation of Marxism, I do not believe that “socialism is inevitable.” But we do know enough to create a positive vision of a commune of communes — and not just a negative criticism of capitalism. We know enough to see the major fault lines of capitalism, particularly its class conflicts (as analyzed by Marx) as well as nonclass conflicts. We can use these to develop a strategy for revolution. Revolution today does mean changing the world — by the empowerment of the working classes and the oppressed of the world. Nothing less will do.

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